

21st Century Cinema: Death and Resurrection in the Desert of the (New) Real by J. Hoberman

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"I predict that all movies will be animated or computer-generated within 15 years."

Bruce Goldstein, "Flashback: The Year in Movies," *Village Voice*, Dec. 28, 1999

"It is in the nature of analogical worlds to provoke a yearning for the past. ... The digital will want to change the world."

D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007)

I. THE MYTH OF "THE MYTH OF TOTAL CINEMA"

Can we speak of a twenty-first-century cinema? If so, on what basis?

Writing in the aftermath of World War II, French film theorist Andre Bazin characterized cinema making as an essentially irrational enterprise--namely, the obsessive quest for that complete representation of reality he termed "total cinema." This mystical guiding myth was, in Bazin's view, a factor of cinema's ontology--the medium's "integral realism," based on the camera's objective gaze and the chemical reaction by which light left an authentic trace on photographic emulsion. Thanks to the impartial, indexical relationship between the photograph and the photographed, motion pictures offered an image "unburdened" by artistic interpretation.

According to the myth of Total Cinema, each and every new technological development--synchronous sound, color, 3-D, Smell-O-Vision--served to take the medium nearer to its imagined essence. "Cinema has not yet been invented! " When true cinema was achieved, the medium itself would disappear--just like the state under true communism. Bazin believed this could happen by the year 2000. In fact, something else occurred: The development of digital imagery broke the indexical bond between photography and the world.

The divorce was initially experienced as a crisis in photography. Thanks to Photoshop, among other means of digital manipulation, the photographic became a subset of the graphic. For motion pictures, the crisis was even more existential: Bazin had imagined cinema as the objective "recreation of the world in its own image." But digital image-making precludes the necessity of having the world, or an actually existing subject, before the camera--let alone

the need for a camera. The history of motion pictures was now the history of animation.

Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) and George Lucas's *Phantom Menace* (1999), two Hollywood blockbusters combining photographic and computer-generated imagery--actual people interacting on-screen with nonexistent creatures--offered early clues to the new direction. (Both movies also engaged in a particular strategy of naturalization by inscribing CGI into prehistory, whether that of the earth or that of the *Star Wars* saga.) So, in another way, did Douglas Gordon's 1993 video installation *24 Hour Psycho*--in which, wrenched from its natural context and re-presented as a re- (or, perhaps, de-) animated, digital image of itself, the old-fashioned analog motion picture became an object of contemplation.

Combining live action with frame-by-frame digital manipulation, *The Matrix* (1999), written and directed by the Wachowski brothers, presented an even more complicated hybrid. No previous animated film had so naturalistically represented the physical world. In addition to reconciling, if not entirely vaulting, the "uncanny valley," the discomfiting gap between photographed humans and computer-generated humanoids, *The Matrix* provided an irresistible ruling metaphor--we live in simulation, a computer-generated illusion concealing the terrifying Desert of the Real--that was heightened by the approach of a new millennium. Thus, in the universe of *The Matrix*, Bazin's dream arrived in the form of a nightmarish virtual existence: Total Cinema as total dissociation from reality.

II. THE NEW REALNESS

If the motion pictures of the twenty-first century were subjected to psychoanalysis, their symptoms might reveal two types of anxiety--one objective, the other neurotic. Objective anxiety is a factor of what film theorist D. N. Rodowick terms the "digital will"--the sense that CGI technology inherently strives to remake the world while motion pictures, as we knew them, are in some sense obsolete, having surrendered their privileged relation to the real.

Objective anxiety underscored the neo-Neorealist antics of the Dogma 95 group--most importantly, Lars von Trier's *Idiots* (1998), with its emphasis on authentic transgressive behavior. The key work begotten of this form of anxiety, however, is Jean-Luc Godard's magisterial *Eloge de l'amour* (*In Praise of Love*, 2001), which, shot two-thirds on black-and-white 35-mm stock and the rest on luridly synthesized digital video, openly mourns the loss of photographic cinema (as well as memory and history and European culture, and perhaps life itself). Other notable cinematic eulogies include Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), a lament for vanished popular cinema in a specifically Taiwanese context, and several avant-garde films: Pat O'Neill's *Decay of Fiction*, Bill Morrison's *Decasia*, and Ernie Gehr's *Cotton Candy* (all released in 2002). Spectrally populating the abandoned Ambassador Hotel, an old-time movie-star hangout and frequent movie location, with transparent costumed actors, O'Neill's work evokes a haunted film set; *Decasia* and *Cotton Candy* are even more overtly preservationist. Rather than a moldering hotel, Morrison documents decomposing 35-mm nitrate footage, while Gehr records the ancient, essentially precinematic toys in San Francisco's Musée Mécanique, notably the sort of hand-cranked photographic flip books once known as Mutoscopes.

We are watching change. That *Cotton Candy* and, albeit to a lesser degree, *Decasia* were themselves digitally produced infuses their pragmatism with a measure of rueful, guilty digital ambivalence. The abandonment of the old medium is similarly acknowledged in Richard Linklater's computer animation *Waking Life* (2001). Shot and edited as an ordinary motion picture and then algorithmically transformed frame by frame into animation, the film proposes a new sort of indexicality. (Linklater even devotes a sequence to playfully dramatizing the Bazinian notion of motion pictures as intrinsic to

a specific time-space.) At the same moment, however, several distinguished film artists created digital works that, in their use of real time and duration, made the motion-picture medium even more itself: for example, Abbas Kiarostami's "undirected" Warholian tracking film *Ten* and Alexander Sokurov's ninety-six-minute, single-take Russian *Ark*, both of which premiered at the 2002 Cannes film festival. And yet the certainty of watching absolute, unmediated continuity is gone. (For Rodowick, digital is by definition montage.) Sokurov even hinted at this by digitally sweetening a small segment of Russian *Ark*.

Ten and Russian *Ark* are most radically Bazinian in their performative aspect--that is, in the orchestration of the camera and profilmic event. In both cases, the directors have made something happen in life: As cinematic as they appear, these motion pictures may be considered a form of canned theater. Elsewhere, the loss of indexicality has promoted a new, compensatory "real-ness," emphasizing film as an object. *Eloge de l'amour*, which begins in medias res and ends with a prolonged flashback, can be understood as a continuous loop--and hence a film installation. *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, a sort of superimposed double feature, also suggests an installation, perhaps one designed to be projected in the haunted, since-demolished Taipei theater in which the movie is set. Both *Decay of Fiction* and Michael Snow's 2002 * *Corpus Callosum*--which, like *Decay of Fiction*, is a twenty-first-century Melies trick film to Kiarostami's and Sokurov's digital Lumiere-style actualites--were exhibited, at least in part, as gallery installations. So, too, Guy Maddin's confessional narrative *Cowards Bend the Knee* (2003), which was initially shown as a modern-day Mutoscope.

Such gratuitous anachronism is something nuttier than mere nostalgia. Artisanal puppet animations like Trey Parker's *Team America: World Police* (2004) and particularly Henry Selick's 3-D *Coraline* (2009), with its perverse, although not absolute, refusal of CGI, are further instances of the New Real-ness; related, albeit disparate, examples include Maddin's deliberately primitive silent feature *Brand upon the Brain!* (2006), Neil Young's Super 8 protest opera *Greendale* (2003), and Ken Jacobs's *Razzle Dazzle: The Lost World* (2006-2007), his digital reworking of a 1903 Edison actualite.

From a philosophical point of view, the most paradoxical exercise in New Realness is von Trier's 2003 *Dogville*. At once abstract and concrete, shot veritestyle on digital video but filled with close-ups and jump cuts, and explicitly set in a realm of self-righteous shared delusion identified as small-town America, *Dogville* plays out on an open, schematic set and could be said to document the scaffold on which a narrative might be constructed or to present a blueprint for a motion picture given form by the mind's eye. (The town's main drag is nostalgically named Elm Street, though, the narrator notes, it is a thoroughfare on which "no elm tree had ever cast its shadow.")

Essentially a three-hour buildup to the end-credit montage, which mixes WPA photos of rural poverty with Danish photographer Jacob Holdt's more contemporary depictions of African-American abjection, *Dogville* saves catharsis for its final moments: The town's hitherto unseen dog turns "real," and so does von Trier's "America." What had been presented before the credits was simply a play--*Dogmaville*--as well as a visual representation. Realness is ruptured by a greater realness--namely, a montage of photographic evidence, wrenching images of human misery, set to a disco beat. It's a nasty prank, but who could possibly laugh at these indexical images of naked distress? Or turn one's back, as we must do in leaving the theater? Are we ignoring reality and returning to *Dogville*? Or is it vice versa?

III. QUID EST VERITAS?

Objective anxiety became manifest in the late 1990s, at the height of the dotcom bubble and the panicky anticipation of the Y2K "bug," a period Rodowick calls "the summer of digital paranoia," when *The Matrix* and its ilk suggested that "all that was chemical and photographic [was] disappearing into the electronic and digital."

Spielberg promised reporters that *War of the Worlds* would be "as ultrarealistic as I've ever attempted to make a movie, in terms of its documentary style." Moreover, he assured them, *War of the Worlds* was not simply entertainment, as opposed to such fantasies of interplanetary warfare as *Independence Day* (1996) and *Starship Troopers* (1997): "We take it much more seriously than that." While suitably fanciful in its representation of cosmic jihad, *War of the Worlds* was exceedingly effective in staging the initial Martian attack on an actual New Jersey

working-class city just across New York Bay from Lower Manhattan.

But although the destruction in Spielberg's film references 9/11 in every instance, the most brutal New Realness is manifested in Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004)--a movie seemingly opposed to all entertainment values and which, in fact, aspired to be far more than a movie. The *Passion of the Christ* is not a narrative but an icon--an object through which to meditate on the spectacle of a man beaten, stomped, and tortured to death. Gibson's Jesus Christ has less in common with any previous movie protagonist than with the greenish-purplish, pustulent, putrefying subject of Matthias Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*. The crux of the movie is the experience of a crucifixion. The near continuous violence and gore is meant to be excruciating for the viewer: In the eleven-minute chastisement sequence, for instance, Jesus is lacerated, first with rods and then with studded whips, until his back resembles a side of beef.

However gruesome, *The Passion* was taken by many as a gift from God. Evangelical leader James Dobson was not alone in welcoming this redemption of a debased popular culture: "In any other context, I could not in good conscience recommend a movie containing this degree of violent content. However, in this case, the violence is intended not to titillate or entertain, but to emphasize the reality of the unspeakable suffering that our Savior endured on our behalf." From the silent era on, movies had drawn power from their affinity to religious ritual; *The Passion* inverted the equation. Functioning as a cult film, it transformed moviegoing from a possibly sinful activity into a source of collective identity and a communal rite. Entire congregations rented theaters in order to share the experience.

As *The Passion's* sanctified violence and horror impressed a devout audience with its realness, so Gibson's extreme filmmaking intrigued secular artists. Not everyone was as honest as Quentin Tarantino, who, asked by John Powers in a 2004 interview whether he'd seen Gibson's *Passion*, replied that he "loved it. ... I think it actually is one of the most brilliant visual storytelling movies I've seen since the talkies. ... It has the power of a silent movie. ... It is pretty violent, I must say. At a certain point, it was like a Takashi Muke film. It got so fucked up it was funny. ... I was into the seriousness of the story, of course, but in the crucifixion scene, when

they turned the cross over, you had to laugh.” Tarantino would subsequently lend his imprimatur to exploitation director Eli Roth, author of the quasi-pornographic torture-based horror films *Cabin Fever* (2002) and *Hostel* (2005), low-budget productions with stylistic affinities to the New Realness, employing Roth to contribute a trailer to his compilation film *Grindhouse* and producing *Hostel: Part II* (both 2007).

If *United 93*, which more or less demands that its audience live through a doomed flight from take-off to crash, is the most therapeutic of these movies, *Kinatay* (whose title means “slaughter” in Tagalog) is the most radical. The movie is crudely shot from the perspective of a twenty-year-old police trainee who, moonlighting for extra money, finds himself trapped (on behalf of the spectator) in a hellish world in which, over the course of a forty-five-minute, more-or-less real-time sequence, a young prostitute is abducted, beaten, tortured, raped, murdered, and matter-of-factly dismembered. Like *The Passion*, *Kinatay* draws on the lowest horror-movie tropes in its grimly experiential representation of human suffering and depraved indifference.

IV. POSTHUMAN CINEMA

The New Realness has found popular expression not only in so-called torture porn but also in the revival of the zombie film. The problematic distinction between dead and undead can, among other things, allegorize the ambiguous relation between analog and digital imagemaking.

At a higher level of aspiration are self-reflexive attempts to represent the New Social Reality (existential terror, cyberglobalism, viral images) in genre terms: Mamoru Oshii’s anime *Innocence* (2004); the parody action flick *Team America: World Police*; Michael Haneke’s art thriller *Cache* (2005); Alfonso Cuarón’s science fiction *Children of Men* (2006); and, admirably indifferent to audience expectations, Richard Kelly’s sci-fi/SNL mash-up *Southland Tales* (2007). Other examples include George Romero’s horror films *Land of the Dead* (2005) and *Diary of the Dead* (2007); nouveau *Godzilla* movies such as Bong Joon-ho’s *The Host* (2006) and Matt Reeves’s *Cloverfield* (2008), notable for integrating the two poles of digital imagemaking, CGI and cell-phone videography; Antonio Campos’s Haneke-influenced youth film *Afterschool* (2008); Brian De Palma’s antiwar *Redacted* (2007); Errol Morris’s investiga-

tive documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008); and two revisionist versions of the globalist melodrama, Jia Zhangke’s theme-park-set *The World* (2004) and Joe Swanberg’s humorously scaled-down exercise in social networking *LOL* (2006).

Close to psychodrama, *LOL* stars its three main creators and was largely improvised. According to a DVD extra, the movie was “born out of ideas battered back and forth via computer, cell phone, etc., and then filmed in the same manner that people use webcams or their cell phones”—which is another way of describing its narrative. The opening shot is of a computer screen with a moving cursor clicking on a file. Someone has posted his girlfriend’s private striptease online. Her dance is crosscut with close-ups of a dozen or more transfixed spectators, each occupying his own personal space and staring dumbfounded at his own personal screen. (This may be compared to the cyberraucion early in *Hostel: Part II*, where would-be killers bid on fresh, unsuspecting victims.)

At the opposite end of the production scale from Swanberg’s comedy of ill manners is Pixar’s even more alienated, mega-million-dollar, state-of-the-art CGI spectacular *WALL-E* (2008), directed by Andrew Stanton. An unaccountably optimistic vision of human extinction, *WALL-E* achieves a measure of uncanny empathy, projecting as its protagonist a solitary robot trash compactor single-mindedly organizing the endless detritus of an abandoned, implicitly analog world.

The spectacle of this devoted ding-bot fashioning a Grand Canyon provides a breathtaking sense of eternity. For much of *WALL-E*, its endearing hero--part Sisyphus, part third-world scavenger--is the earth’s last vestige of humanity. Utterly superfluous, the descendants of the planet’s former inhabitants drift through space in a giant robot-controlled shopping mall known as the Axiom, too bloated to do more than slurp down Happy Meals and watch TV.

Is this universally acclaimed motion picture part of the problem or part of the solution? *WALL-E* satirizes the technology it deploys, bemoans yet celebrates the death of analog imagemaking, and consigns old-fashioned movies to the trash heap even while worshipping their fragments. Although Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is ruthlessly parodied throughout, a Hollywood film that began shooting the very month of 2001’s release is *WALL-E*’s priv-

ileged artifact. An ancient VHS tape of Hello, Dolly! (once the epitome of retrograde moviemaking), seen solely in terms of a back-lot musical number, serves to instruct the eponymous robot on the nature of the human and ultimately stands as a synecdoche for the cultural heritage of the pre-apocalyptic earth.

At once avant and pop, horrendously bleak and cheerfully cute, WALL-E is the quintessential twenty-first-century motion picture. Celebrating (or embalming) an obsolete technology, it's the 2001 of 2008--a postphotographic film set in a posthuman universe. The movie's single human actor is the designated special effect. A clip of cheerful prancing on a long-lost Hollywood soundstage signifies the Desert of the Real, as glimpsed from within the Matrix of Total Cinema.

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